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## **Middlebrow Postcolonialisms: Studying Readers in the Digital Age**

### **1. Whither Postcolonial Cultural Studies?**

Marked by an overwhelming proliferation of meta-critical discourses and the steady extension of disciplinary boundaries, both postcolonial and cultural studies are now firmly established fields of research that have found a stable home internationally, in university programmes, research funding bodies and beyond. Highlighting their maturity, both disciplines continually produce self-reflexive accounts or promise yet another turn of their agendas, as Lawrence Grossberg's *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (2010) or, more recently, Chantal Zabus's edited volume *The Future of Postcolonial Studies* (2015) and Elleke Boehmer's *The Future of the Postcolonial Past* (2017) suggest. Judging by the contents of these publications, the future of postcolonial and cultural studies looks decidedly interdisciplinary. Contemporary literary and cultural studies scholars with an interest in questions of power and resistance, dominance and subordination, inclusion and exclusion already draw on and further develop a constantly growing corpus of critical literature that works across the disciplines and provides (mostly textual) analyses of ever new regions, agents and media. Given the abundance of contributions to postcolonial cultural studies, what can this article add to existing scholarly ventures into the shared territory of the two research areas?

The current mass production of articles and chapters, special issues and edited collections (see "Introduction" to this focus section) easily obscures the fact that there have been few attempts at defining the *political* agenda of a common critical project. In fact, the institutional establishment of postcolonial and cultural studies has been accompanied by a number of critical voices which caution that the fields gradually compromise their "foundational resistance to the power of the discipline" (Turner 2012, 46; see Chibber 2013, 1-5). Asking *What's Become of Cultural Studies?* (2012), Graeme Turner, for instance, finds that the field has lost its earlier energy and political edge. In order to substantiate his larger argument about cultural studies' growing participation in capitalist production mechanisms, he notes: "[w]hen Stuart Hall is reported as saying that he cannot bear to read another analysis of *The Sopranos* [...] on the one hand, and when so many people are writing analyses of *The Sopranos*, on the other hand, the warning bells for cultural studies should be ringing" (2012, 37). For Turner, the discipline's subordination to a market-oriented logic of exploitation reduces cultural studies to "a genre of academic performance" that is "merely self-serving" (2012, 158), i.e. targeted towards scholarly comfort and contentment. Representing the postcolonial realm, Nadia Atia and Kate Houlden observe that, "[i]n the present moment, postcolonial studies is undergoing a crisis in the status and direction of the discipline, which is reflected in the proliferation of labels such as 'global fiction' and

'world literature'" (2019, 2), two particularly fuzzy terms that effectively iron out the subversive wrinkles of postcolonial criticism. Yet more outspoken about the precise direction the discipline is taking, Christopher Taylor, who equally comments on the shift from the 'postcolonial' to the 'global Anglophone,' remarks that "the field seems to be going through a round of enforced depoliticisation and programmed identity loss" (2018, 235).

While I agree that the "inflated popularity" (Chibber 2013, 3) of postcolonial cultural studies approaches continually undermines the disciplines' politicized beginnings, this article does not simply join the above critical chorus. Rather, it seeks to construct a common theoretical and methodological scale of reference and, by implication, a platform for radical critique. To this end, the contribution focuses on a quickly emerging sub-field of postcolonial cultural studies that has the potential to revive the materialist wing of postcolonial studies and regain sight of the "actually existing political, economic, and cultural conditions" (Parry 2004, 80) governing the production and consumption of postcolonial cultural commodities: the postcolonial middlebrow. Far from unproblematic, as both Chris Bongie (2008) and Beth Driscoll (2014) have amply demonstrated, the concept of the middlebrow evokes the unconcealed commercial interests of an increasingly globalized middle class and thus serves to reinvigorate the disciplines' socio-economic outlook.

Beginning with a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the recent essay collection *Popular Postcolonialisms* (2019), edited by Atia and Houlden, which sets out to differentiate between notions of the popular and the middlebrow, the article's first part concentrates on Vivek Chibber's highly disputed study of *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (2013) in order to probe in what ways the sociologist's key ideas serve as a viable theoretical frame for analysing middlebrow strategies of consuming the postcolonial in the digital age. Anticipating the digital turn of postcolonial cultural studies, the latter half of the article suggests a method for studying readers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and investigates a case study of 5,220 online responses to eight contemporary Nigerian novels taken from Amazon, Goodreads and YouTube in terms of what I call the 'digital affect:' an empathic online community of metropolitan and ethnically diverse audiences whose compassion with the postcolonial Other functions to adjust the middle-class emotional habitus to the demands of the present globalized and digitized book market. Applying the toolbox of corpus-assisted discourse studies, I present a methodological procedure derived from corpus linguistics in order to examine the online community's response patterns and ponder whether they signal the frequently evoked egalitarian effects of social media or rather the homogenizing functions attributed to the economic power of a few dominant internet corporations. The article closes with an application of Chibber's main ideas to my material and interrogates the relation between post/colonialism, capitalism and emotions from a transhistorical perspective.

## 2. Popular vs. Middlebrow Postcolonialisms?

What are the merits of distinguishing between notions of the popular and the middlebrow? Does the distinction potentially strengthen the political thrust of

postcolonial cultural studies? The essay collection *Popular Postcolonialisms: Discourses on Empire and Popular Culture* (2019) promises to answer these questions as it provides twelve articles that focus on popular and middlebrow forms of postcolonial cultural production and consumption. Evenly divided into four sections ("The Radical Popular," "The Middlebrow," "Commodification" and "Technology"), the individual chapters discuss a variety of different media and topics, ranging from fiction and film to online platforms, from pop-cultural characters like Frankenstein and Tarzan to the Belgian detective Hercule Poirot. Although the very genre 'essay collection' conventionally emphasizes the wide scope of a research field over the construction of the contributors' shared agenda, the chapters in *Popular Postcolonialisms* are overwhelmingly informed by the endeavour to conceptualize the popular – including the middlebrow – as a place of resistance. Summarizing the thematically diverse contributions in their "Introduction," the editors Atia and Houlden constantly stress the subversive impact of their material and sketch not only popular culture as "a site for experimentation, contestation and resistance" (2019, 7) but equally refer to the middlebrow as "a realm from which to question, critique or challenge" (2019, 9) colonial discourses.

Although the editors' initial differentiation between "The Radical Popular" and "The Middlebrow" is thus compromised, the table of contents of their collection gestures beyond the majority of postcolonial investigations that reduce cultural studies to notions of the popular (see e.g. Devadas and Prentice 2011). Nicola Humble, a key representative of middlebrow studies, indicates that this reduction may result from the political self-understanding of many postcolonial cultural studies practitioners which, arguably, clashes with the assimilative practices of the middlebrow: "[w]hile the lowbrow has undergone a process of critical reclamation in recent decades, with the development of popular culture studies as a legitimate area of academic interest, the middlebrow has remained firmly out in the cold" (2001, 1). Gradually recovering from its discursive history of academic disparagement, the middlebrow meanwhile designates a flourishing field of study that is currently beginning to expand its borders and explore its relations to post/colonial cultural phenomena. *Popular Postcolonialisms* participates in this scholarly trend of testing the flexibility of what this focus section classifies as postcolonial cultural studies. In their attempt to read the postcolonial middlebrow as subversive or resisting, however, Atia and Houlden do not make full use of the concept's potential to sharpen the socio-economic outlook of literary and cultural studies.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Most outstanding among those who fully avail themselves of middlebrow studies' "new and creative phase" (Ehland and Gohrisch 2020, 8) are the contributors to the recent essay collection *Imperial Middlebrow*, edited by Christoph Ehland and Jana Gohrisch, who illustrate how middlebrow writing on the Empire served to disseminate and legitimize imperial ideology. My special thanks goes to Jana Gohrisch who, despite providing this stimulating and supportive testing ground for my ideas, has been and continues to be most generous with her time and expertise in the process of supervising my PhD project. Her thoroughly analytical approach to the middlebrow enabled several of the key observations of this article in the first place.

This is not to suggest that the popular and the middlebrow constitute opposing entities that signal resistance to and complicity with the market, respectively. In contrast to Atia and Houlden, who consider subversion the norm, cultural studies has always stressed the simultaneity of resistant and complicit forces that define all kinds of cultural products as well as their consumption, from womens' magazines (McRobbie 1999) to romance novels (Radway 1984).<sup>2</sup> Janice Radway's work on cultural reception further highlights that the distinction between different forms of culture may hold the "immensely seductive promise that a hidden structure organizes culture" (Driscoll 2014, 1) but is difficult to establish. While *Reading the Romance* rates as a key cultural studies "investigation of the act of reading" (Brunsdon 1991, 372), Radway's later study *A Feeling for Books* (1997) is generally regarded as an early contribution to middlebrow studies. Drawing a close link between commerce and femininity while claiming that consumers show signs of "disput[ing] and contest[ing] the control of [dominant] ideological forms" (1984, 184) in both publications (see 1997, 1-17), she reinforces the central cultural studies argument that evaluative practices hardly certify the inherent 'quality' of cultural products themselves and rather disclose the tastes and values of those who comment on it.

And yet, my expertise in the middlebrow in both its historical and contemporary manifestations has fostered my conviction that some postcolonial cultural products are most fruitfully approached by "the active examination and deployment of the middlebrow" (Humble 2013, 97) – and not the popular. While the above examples illustrate that both forms are "thoroughly implicated in commercial distribution networks" (Driscoll 2014, 23) which are equally embraced and resisted, the middlebrow presents a unique opportunity to reclaim class as a central category for the analysis of postcolonial cultural products. Pushing the field-defining cultural studies publications of Richard Hoggart (*The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life*, 1957) or E.P. Thompson (*The Making of the English Working Class*, 1963), which challenged hierarchical definitions of culture "from a position that defended working-class and subcultural heritages" (Atia and Houlden 2019, 3), to the interpretive margins, neoliberalism has contributed to the "decline of class analysis" (Chibber 2013, xi) in postcolonial and cultural studies.

I contend that it is impossible to investigate the middlebrow without focusing on the socio-economic conditions that govern participation in culture. The following key arguments of Chibber are certainly worthwhile to everyone with an interest in repoliticizing postcolonial cultural studies and applicable to the exploration of other postcolonial cultural products. I shall demonstrate that his conceptualization of global capitalism is particularly helpful to consider the middlebrow's "middle-class longing for increased social status" (Driscoll 2014, 23). This longing manifests itself in reception patterns that "emphasize emotional connections with literary works" (Driscoll 2014, 32) and thereby establishes specific "*emotion ideologies* about appropriate attitudes, feelings, and [...] responses" (Turner and Stets 2005, 36; original emphasis) to postcolonial novels. Chibber's reclaiming of Marxist thought shall prove most

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2 I thank the anonymous peer reviewer for pointing my attention to these publications.

productive in unearthing the economic power relations of a global book market that trades emotions as commodities (see Illouz 2018).

### 3. Theory: Reclaiming Marxist Thought

Hardly any intervention into postcolonial cultural studies has received as much attention as Chibber's second book *Postcolonial Studies and the Specter of Capital* (2013). The controversy over the sociologist's study has become known as 'The Chibber Debate' that, in its basic terms, signals a fierce scholarly discussion about postcolonial studies' troubled relation to Marxist criticism.<sup>3</sup> Responses to Chibber's monograph range from Slavoj Žižek's estimation that the study caused "a burst of fresh air dispelling the stale aroma of the pseudo-radical establishment" (quoted on the cover of Chibber's book) – as vividly exemplified by Atia and Houlden's edited collection – to Christopher Taylor's accusation that it "reanimates postcolonial theory in order to really, really kill it this time" (2018, 235). Taking mediating positions, Benita Parry and Neil Lazarus find that Chibber's argument is compromised by its failure to precisely define its object of study. Though in favour of his overall endeavour to realign the discipline with its socialist traditions, the two scholars specializing in the materialist branch of postcolonial studies bemoan that Chibber makes a promise that he cannot keep. Commenting on the study's title, Lazarus remarks that, "[h]ad this book been entitled *Subaltern Studies and the Specter of Capital*, Chibber would still not have had everyone agreeing with him, naturally, but he could at least have argued that this book does exactly what it says on the tin" (2016, 93). In a similar vein, Parry notes that "the study is *not* what it purports to be" (2017, 186; original emphasis).

I argue that the various critical responses that concentrate on Chibber's alleged misidentification of postcolonial studies with subaltern studies (see also Brennan 2014, 73; Taylor 2018, 237) detract from the study's potential to redefine the future of postcolonial cultural studies. It is indeed debatable whether the South Asian-focused historiographical work by Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty, among others, constitutes "[t]he most illustrious representative of postcolonial studies in the scholarship on the Global South" (Chibber 2013, 5). However, Chibber's focus does not render the following trenchant comments about postcolonial cultural studies incorrect. Accordingly, I read his claim that subaltern studies' emphasis on difference has

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3 Testifying to the phenomenal impact of Chibber's study, the phrase appears in the title of Achin Vanaik's introduction to a collection of essays titled *The Debate on Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (2017). The volume collects various responses by representatives of subaltern studies, Chibber's prime target of criticism, and renowned postcolonialists as well as Chibber's reactions to them. The phrase used by Vanaik deliberately evokes 'The Brenner Debate' that resulted from the publication of Robert Brenner's article on "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe" (1976) which Chibber draws on to discuss the change from feudalism to capitalism (see Chibber 2013, 59; Taylor 2018, 235).

displaced Marxism and, with it, the investigation of global capitalism, as equally applicable to postcolonial cultural studies more generally.<sup>4</sup>

Chibber's meta-theory begins with the observation that two of the most central tenets of Marxism have come into doubt among postcolonial and cultural studies scholars. The first tenet concerns the conviction that capitalism constitutes a universalizing system that, having originated in Europe, has by now spread to every corner of the globe. The second tenet, which is best described as a reaction to this process, concerns the resistance to exploitative economic systems that unites working people across the world, irrespective of their race, religion or any other marker of identity and difference. These two tenets, which have long formed the basis of Marxist approaches to the colonized world, are increasingly attacked as generalizing assumptions. Pointing to the move in postcolonial studies from materialist to poststructuralist analysis and its concomitant foregrounding of cultural hybridity and diversity, Chibber shows that postcolonial scholars reject Marxism's "internal coherence and systematicity" (2013, 3) and the generalizing notions that such a theory produces because, for them, they not only obscure local histories and deny the agency of local people but furthermore prove complicit in oppressive systems such as Western imperialism (see 2013, 17-19; 22-23).<sup>5</sup> Chibber summarizes the dominant postcolonial conception of the world thus:

the colonial and postcolonial social formations cannot be assimilated into the same general framework as those of the advanced West. Not only do they diverge in their basic structure, but they cannot be assumed to be moving along the same broad trajectory of development. From this premise, postcolonial theory draws a seemingly natural conclusion: if the reality of colonial social formations is fundamentally different from that of Western social formations, the theoretical categories generated from the experience of the West cannot be appropriate for an understanding of the East. (2013, 17)

Creating "a deep fault line separating Western capitalist nations from the postcolonial world" (Chibber 2013, 50), postcolonial scholars inevitably question the application of Western concepts such as 'capitalism' or 'bourgeoisie' to postcolonial contexts as, for them, such generalizing practices bespeak a Eurocentric master narrative that justifies

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4 Although Chibber's study primarily criticizes "the Subalternists' historical sociology, particularly their understanding of the East-West-divergence" (2013, 22), the first chapter titled "Postcolonial Theory and *Subaltern Studies*" (2013, 1-27; original emphasis) repeatedly indicates that the group's focus on the supposedly unbridgeable differences between the West and the non-West as well as its resulting rejection of universalizing categories "is consistent with the broad orientation of postcolonial studies" (2013, 22).

5 Chibber describes postcolonial scholars' rejection of the two Marxist tenets with the terms 'historicism' and 'agency' (2013, 17). Accordingly, the first tenet is rejected on the grounds that "the *power relations* produced by Western capitalism were unlike the power relations capitalism generated elsewhere" (2013, 22; original emphasis), the second on the grounds that "political actors are motivated by a different set of concerns in the East than they are in the West" (2013, 22). For a detailed illustration of the above issues, see Chibber's critical reading of Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000) which negates capitalism's universalizing force by referring to "the various History 2s that always modify History 1 and thus act as grounds for claiming historical difference" (71; see Chibber 2013, 207; 209-248).

post/colonial oppression. Chibber thus demonstrates that, if capitalism is understood as a Western phenomenon, its global spread can only be grasped as an imposition of Western modes of living that, in the words of Lazarus, are "deplored as imperialistic" (2016, 101).

Seeking an alternative account of the relation between the West and the non-West, Chibber leans on the pillars of world-systems theory, which once was a household name in cultural studies.<sup>6</sup> His conceptualization of the world as an interconnected whole allows him to develop the following argument about the effects of capitalist globalization which

does not inevitably turn every culture into a replica of what has been observed in the West. The universalization of capital is perfectly compatible with the persistence of social, cultural, and political differentiation between East and West. Capital does not have to obliterate differences in order to universalize itself. It merely has to subordinate those dimensions of social reproduction that are essential to its own functioning. These dimensions are the ones directly involved in the production and distribution of use-values. (2013, 150-151)

By demonstrating that "theories affirming capital's universalizing drive do not have to efface historical diversity" (2013, 239), Chibber convincingly challenges the assumption of Chakrabarty and others that global capitalism fosters "a purely homogenizing dynamic" (2013, 245). On the contrary, he highlights that the worldwide proliferation of capitalist relations produces discontinuous and disruptive effects and thereby affirms two characteristics that have always been "central to the Marxist framework" (2013, 239), particularly to the theory of uneven and combined development first formulated by Leon Trotsky in *History of the Russian Revolution* (1932-33), which he briefly mentions at the close of his study (see 2013, 292).<sup>7</sup>

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6 In his review of the study, Lazarus lists more than twenty publications on world-systems theory, globalism and neocolonialism and the like, all of which appeared in *Race & Class*, a leading scholarly journal on imperialism and racism, in the 1970s and 1980s (see 2016, 96).

7 Lazarus rightly criticizes Chibber for his failure to rely "more systematically on the resources of the theory of uneven and combined development" (2016, 99) as well as the materialist approaches of Aijaz Ahmad (1992), Parry (1987; 2004) or himself. Writing two years before the publication of Chibber's book, Lazarus emphasizes that "colonialism is part and parcel of a larger, enfolding historical dynamic, which is that of capitalism in its global trajectory" (2011, 7). In his 2016 review, he consequently agrees with Chibber that postcolonial scholarship has "fail[ed] both to reckon adequately with the historical *unprecedentedness* of capitalism; that is, the *difference* of (capitalist) modernity from all prior universalizing projects, and to understand that the 'worlding' or 'universalization' of capitalist social relations – their dispersal throughout the world – operates not through the production of sameness everywhere [...] but on the basis of uneven and combined development" (2016, 98; original emphases). Given that Chibber relegates Lazarus to a footnote, one can well understand the reviewer's comments on the study's "distasteful [...] register" (2016, 88) which disregards academic conventions (see also 2016, 90; 92). It remains debatable, however, whether Chibber's tone results from "the market principles of ceaseless turnover and compulsory novelty" (2016, 89) that Lazarus notes in view of the study's excessive marketing.

#### 4. Telling Example: Locating the New Nigerian Novel

Chibber's call to revive Marxist thought within postcolonial cultural studies and his resulting notion of the world as an integrated place gains special significance in the context of both the new Nigerian novel and the digital media used to market and consume it. Firmly positioned within scholarly debates about 'world literature' and frequently celebrated for fostering "discourse[s] of humanitarian sympathy" (Dalley 2014, 132) across national borders (see also e.g. Hron 2008; Norridge 2012), the literary phenomenon seems threatened by the same depoliticizing fuzziness that informs literary and cultural studies accounts about the "transformative, resistant potentials" (Monk 2011, 436) of social media. Capitalizing on the "globalizing of experience and outlook" (Brennan 1997, 1), the international book market offers various postcolonial novels as a prompt for "sympathetic engagement" (Boehmer 2017, 19) among strangers and thereby invites middlebrow "exercises in 'self-fashioning' in which class privilege is rendered as a form of social conscience" (Driscoll 2014, 198). In order to suggest a repeatable method of investigating the power structures of a globalized and digitized middlebrow literary market that is applicable to other contemporary postcolonial fictions, I shall employ the new Nigerian novel as a 'telling example'.<sup>8</sup> Framed as global commodities, the recent literary productions by Nigerian diasporic authors may well be viewed through the lens of Chibber's statements on the effects of global capitalism.

To begin with, Chibber's socio-economic perspective challenges any conceptions of the global literary market as an idealized place that encourages the recognition of "our common humanity" (Appiah 2006, cover blurb). Instead, the "Benneton-ish cosmopolitanism" (Mishra 2013) of contemporary Nigerian writers indicates uneven and combined developments in the world literary sphere which promises "membership in the global elite" (McPherson 2017, 260) of literary production and thereby erodes Nigeria's publishing industry (see Huggan 2008; Shercliff 2016). In his article "The Global Program Era" (2018), for instance, Kalyan Nadiminti focuses on postcolonial authors' education in the fee-paying creative writing programmes of US and UK prestigious universities to show how they promote "a globalizing middle-class voice" (2018, 377). Shifting attention to another economic system entangled in contemporary postcolonial production, Shola Adenekan and Helen Cousins demonstrate how "African authors represent themselves *within cyberspace* [...] as individuals with a burgeoning self-identification as middle-class" (2014, 1; my emphasis).<sup>9</sup> Instead of

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8 In her article "To Study the Fragments/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World" (2006), Lara Putnam demonstrates how the study of microhistory contributes to the knowledge about the "social networks and flows of information" (2006, 618) across the Atlantic. Accordingly, a telling example reduces the scale of observation to a specific fragment which, in turn, allows for the exploration of more general or overarching patterns.

9 Adenekan and Cousins mainly focus on how Nigerian writers use digital media to produce and distribute short pieces of literature and discuss how the World Wide Web influences practices of writing. However, they also relate their observations to the social formations that the authors emerge from by continually pointing to the "material goods, education, and technological skills" required to obtain "access into the online space" (2014, 6) in the first place.

functioning as mere market-driven tools that are "duped by [...] neocolonial ideologies" (Benwell et al. 2012, 3-4), then, Nigerian diasporic writers like Ayobami Adebayo and Chigozie Obioma use social media to stylize themselves as mediators in the digital trade of emotions and thereby promise their ethnically diverse audiences participation in and belonging to the same global market structures. However, the agency that authors (and readers) exert to define emotion ideologies and the rules of performing them should not distract attention away from the "big-media power and ownership" (Monk 2011, 436) which potentially challenge Chibber's negation of the "purely homogenizing dynamic" (2013, 245) resulting from global economic structures.

Foregrounding an economic perspective on the role of emotions in social media contexts, my take on the online responses to contemporary Nigerian novels emphasizes the distribution mechanisms of Amazon, Goodreads and YouTube, which range among the largest and most influential US-American social media providers. More precisely, I argue that the corporate behemoths sell the online collection and discussion of books "as a means of social networking" (Nakamura 2013, 239) in order to market a homogenous set of middlebrow reading modes that stress intimate, emotional and ethical engagements with the postcolonial Other.<sup>10</sup> As the subsequent case study demonstrates, the often obscure practices of these new regimes of capital accumulation have severely impeded the study of readers in the digital age.

### 5. Case Study: Investigating Readers in the Digital Age

Since middlebrow literary culture increasingly "operat[es] in a digital environment with new global reach" (Driscoll 2014, 4), it seems appropriate to position the study of online reviews within the field of digital humanities and the innovative methods that accompany its emergence. Demonstrating how computational approaches facilitate the investigation of literary texts, Franco Moretti's *Distant Reading* (2013) or Matthew L. Jockers's *Macroanalysis* (2013) also prompt that computing in the humanities can invigorate the exploration of reading behaviour. Discussing the "Potentialities and Limits of the Analysis of Online Reviews as a Resource for Literary Studies" (2018), Janneke Rauscher claims that the availability of 'Big Data' potentially overcomes the constraints of "sociological and ethnological methods" (2018, 308). Compared to the "laboratory-like, experimental settings" (Rauscher 2018, 308) created by reader surveys and interviews or reading logs, the abundance of online reviews suggests "that it's all there, we only have to grab it, without ever having to leave our desktop" (Rauscher 2018, 308-309). Despite this promising outlook, however, scholarly analyses of online reviews remain rare,<sup>11</sup> which can, among other factors, be ascribed to the various unanswered "methodological questions emerging with this new source" (Rauscher 2018, 309).

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10 Considering the annual revenue of the companies, this business model proves indeed lucrative. A quick Google search yields that Amazon and Goodreads, which was purchased by Amazon in 2015, gained a yearly revenue of \$232,9 billion in 2018, while YouTube generated an estimated annual revenue between \$16 and \$25 billion in 2019. See also Wakabayashi (2019).

11 This finding applies in particular to postcolonial studies whose practitioners may well fear that the results possibly compromise the field's "liberatory political project" (Benwell et al.

Notwithstanding the time-consuming practice of gathering, saving and preparing online data for the application of "computational linguistic software that operates with simple searching and matching techniques" (Rauscher 2018, 313), the study of digital data entangles the researcher in those surveillance capitalist structures she seeks to study from what seems to be the 'outside.' Self-constructed corpora bear the risk of recreating the undefined algorithms of Web 2.0 companies that "regulate whose voice is heard" (Rauscher 2018, 311) or whose face is seen. Accordingly, the researcher who sets out to examine those platforms which aim at "claiming human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of exploitation, prediction and sales" (Zuboff 2019, ix) may end up being examined by the platforms.<sup>12</sup>

Although the researcher's inevitable implication in "the culture of corporate data mining" (Murray 2018, 152) constitutes the most significant methodological limitation, I contend that literary and cultural studies scholars have a responsibility to explore how major internet corporations shapeshift and profit from the digital "communication about books as social practices" (Rauscher 2018, 314). Instead of being discouraged by their entrapment in the economic order, scholars should therefore use online reviews as an opportunity to strengthen their economic perspective on literature and other cultural commodities and the ways in which they are created and consumed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If anything, Amazon, Goodreads and YouTube serve as a necessary reminder that literary culture is a business. Consequently, corpora of online reviews present a unique possibility to study the marketing strategies of Web 2.0 companies that, at least with regard to my telling example, follow middlebrow protocols.

The subsequent case study is divided into two sections. Following the presentation of the corpus construction, I shall employ linguistic software to investigate the readers' emotional responses to the new Nigerian novel.

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2012, 8). Commenting on their notorious neglect of audiences, C.L. Innes notes that postcolonial scholars tend to construct the reader as either "a member of the writer's nation" or "a generalized cosmopolitan Westerner" (2007, 200). My case study challenges this reductive dichotomy by highlighting that the definition of readers in spatial terms is especially futile in postcolonial – and increasingly digitized – contexts where "reading, viewing and listening are frequently activities involving mobile, exilic and diasporic audiences" (Benwell et al. 2012, 1). Instead, digital media construct virtual spaces which define membership predominantly in terms of class.

- 12 One possibility to circumvent algorithmic influences on the construction of online corpora consists in the use of different computers, which I seized to verify the Amazon and Goodreads reviews. A second opportunity is offered by desktop applications such as NordVPN that, concealing the computer's IP and location, function to encode the researcher's internet traffic. I employed NordVPN when collecting YouTube data to make sure that the results were independent of my browser's search history, which would severely challenge any arguments about the homogeneity of social media sites. Moreover, NordVPN allows the researcher to choose among 5,519 servers in 59 countries around the world. Since Nigeria is not included in the server list, I checked the YouTube page using a Brazilian and a South African server and found that the recommended videos did not differ from the results yielded by my computer with a German IP. The application thus proved useful to substantiate the assumption that middlebrow reception patterns serve the proliferation of global economic structures.

### Corpus Construction

Figure 1 presents a sample of 5,220 online reviews (i.e. 1,892 pages) for eight new Nigerian novels selected between March and July 2019 to carry out the case study.

Novel <sup>13</sup>	Amazon	Goodreads	YouTube
Ayobami Adebayo: <i>Stay With Me</i> (2017)	385	256	96
Chimamanda Adichie: <i>Half of a Yellow Sun</i> (2006)	1,653	244	55
Akwaeke Emezi: <i>Freshwater</i> (2018)	83	294	78
Diana Evans: <i>26a</i> (2005)	49	118	2
Chigozie Obioma: <i>The Fishermen</i> (2015)	215	248	36
Chinelo Okparanta: <i>Under the Udala Trees</i> (2015)	126	292	44
Helen Oyeyemi: <i>The Icarus Girl</i> (2005)	78	283	6
Taiye Selasi: <i>Ghana Must Go</i> (2013)	315	237	27
<i>Total</i>	2,904	1,972	344

Figure 1: Corpus of Online Reviews

Needless to say, a corpus of online material can never be exhaustive as it is, by definition, continually growing and changing. The unequal numbers across the different platforms result from two crucial factors that influence the construction of online corpora. The first factor relates to the platform-specific rules and regulations, i.e. the 'netiquette' (see Rauscher 2018, 310), the second one to the resources of the researcher. While Amazon restricts reviewing to its customers and "details how many words a review should ideally have" (Rauscher 2018, 310), it does not limit the researcher's access to a selected number of reviews.<sup>14</sup> The case is different with regard to Goodreads which, featuring an estimated number of 34 million reviews (see Rauscher 2018, 308),

13 Arguably, both the larger argument of this article and the subsequent procedure hinge on the categorization of the eight novels as middlebrow. Moreover, a focus on the novels' aesthetic choices highlights that their readers do not simply transpose their emotional responses to any given book and thereby saves them from accusations of turning 'high' literature into "a *pocket* within commodity culture" (Frow 1995, 86; original emphasis). The linguistic review analysis is thus informed by the assumption that contemporary Nigerian novels "imagine, address, and interpellate their readers (Aubry 2011, 10) and their middlebrow responses. Despite their digital middlebrow contexts of production, distribution and consumption, the key textual middlebrow characteristic of the above and various other fictions by contemporary Nigerian authors consists in what Gesa Stedman calls a 'surface diversity' that "is founded on repeated and repetitive deep plots which play to the middle-class galleries of the readers" (2020, 207). Concealing its uniform plot and character constructions or its clichéd metaphors, the new Nigerian novel mixes popular generic features with "the most up-market modernist or postmodernist technical twists" (Stedman 2020, 207) and thereby renders conventional distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow literature, professional and lay audiences, education and entertainment obsolete. Its prevalent *Bildungsroman* structure further attests to its reproduction of "neoliberal, middle-class political beliefs and concepts" (Stedman 2020, 207) which train its global Anglophone audiences into the worldwide trade of emotions (see Moretti 1987; 2013, 43-62).

14 However, Rauscher cautions that "every platform, commercial or not, reserves the right to delete any specific review or user account without having to give reasons for this" (2018, 311).

ranges among the "largest social network site[s]" (Nakamura 2013, 239). Goodreads only shows a maximum of 300 reviews per book which are selected by an unspecified default algorithm.<sup>15</sup> Despite the constraints that result from the platforms' netiquette, the written reviews on Amazon and Goodreads are relatively easy to gather and save, although the researcher has to make sure to exclude reviews that appear several times, limit themselves to comments on shipping or are written in a language other than English. The number of reviews on YouTube is comparably low because it is more laborious to both make the videos and prepare them for the application of linguistic software. Even though YouTube provides automated subtitles in most (but not all) cases, the generated texts do not include punctuation and are frequently full of typos. Similar phenomena can, of course, be observed in the Amazon and Goodreads reviews but YouTube generally requires more manual editing and, at times, entire transcriptions.

Generally speaking, the choice of more than one platform allows the researcher to compare and contrast them in terms of their design and the middlebrow measures taken to market reading as a social and emotional cultural practice. The reader profiles, produced from a mixture of user- and system-generated information, indicate that the different sites foster varying degrees of investment within and across the digital reading communities. Against this backdrop, a comparison between the reviews on Amazon, Goodreads and YouTube also serves to examine the similarities and differences in expressing emotions in the separate communities and interrogate the homogenizing cultural work of the globally operating internet corporations.

### *Keyword Analysis*

The study of emotions with linguistic software entails a number of challenges which are most vividly illustrated by Beth Driscoll's recent endeavour to combine middlebrow studies and digital humanities. Constituting an update of her 2014 monograph, Driscoll's article "Sentiment Analysis and the Literary Festival Audience" (2015) presents a computer-assisted method of investigating 20,189 tweets that were produced in the course of the 2013 Australian Writers Festival to explore "literary festivals and their emotional impact on audiences" (2015, 861). Instead of close reading the tweets, Driscoll investigates her dataset by drawing on SentiStrength, "one of the most commonly used sentiment analysis programs" (2015, 863), which allows her to measure the valence, i.e. "the degree to which an [expressed] emotion is strongly positive or negative" (2015, 863), and the arousal, i.e. "the strength of that emotion on a numerical scale" (2015, 863). Although she repeatedly highlights the usefulness of digital humanities tools for analysing large-sized text corpora "generated in a Web 2.0 world" (2015, 862), Driscoll does not fail to address some of the limitations that accompany their application. Discussing the programme's merits and demerits at the beginning of her article, for instance, she notes that SentiStrength's approach to emotional language

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15 It is highly likely, however, that the choice of this default setting shows the reviews with the most 'likes' and comments in descending order. Taken together, the actual number of reviews by far exceeds the 1,972 Goodreads reviews indicated in Figure 1. I counted a total amount of 18,738 reviews for my corpus of primary texts in July 2019.

use remains "potentially reductive" (2015, 863) as the software "may not capture the expressed sentiment" in tweets "that are ironic, or that do not use emotion words but nonetheless describe an emotional state" (2015, 865). Attempting to counter "the risk of reducing expressions of emotion to a numerical scale" (2015, 863), she suggests to "maintain a connection between computational analysis and more established cultural studies approaches" (2015, 863). In practice, this mixed method leads Driscoll to compare the programme's rating of positive and negative sentiment with that of two independent "human coders" (2015, 865). Assessing the agreement rate between the computational and the human coding of emotions, she concludes that "asking SentiStrength about the sentiment of a text is not substantially less useful than asking the same question of a human reader" (2015, 865). If anything, this observation testifies to the fact that 'emotion' is a notoriously "complex" (Driscoll 2015, 863) and elusive concept. Instead of taking this insight as an occasion to define the term and further explore its function in digital contexts, however, Driscoll uses the result of her comparison to suggest that computerized analysis can be safely applied to identify the tweets' "emotion hotspots" (2015, 868) which, in turn, offer a prolific "basis for targeted close readings" (2015, 862).

Driscoll's article provides an invaluable inspiration for my case study because it demonstrates both the immense possibilities and, perhaps more involuntarily, the severe pitfalls of applying digital humanities tools in middlebrow consumption contexts. Her comments on SentiStrength reveal that any method solely based on computerized research proves too imprecise to account for "the plethora of interpretive issues around emotion, including its performative functions [...], the building of social networks and the reinforcement of rituals" (2015, 863). Moreover, I have serious concerns about her deliberate downplaying of the fact that various digital humanities tools, such as SentiStrength, originate from "programs that track consumer satisfaction with goods and services" and frequently feature "commercial applications including algorithms for advertising placement and recommendations" (2015, 863).<sup>16</sup> Conceptualizing the computer programme as an agent and using passive constructions to explain its operating principle, Driscoll relinquishes the task of defining emotion to advertising agencies and their financial interests. Following SentiStrength's reductive approach to emotion as being either positive or negative *for business success*, Driscoll does not sufficiently address the commercial underpinnings of both the platforms and the tools employed to study them.

In order to develop a more nuanced definition of emotion that goes beyond the evaluative (not to say naturalizing) principles of the SentiStrength software designers, I shall approach my digital dataset with a linguistic keyword analysis to demonstrate how emotional language functions as a commodity in the global economic order. Referring to a particular branch of corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS), keyword

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16 The primarily economic function of the software is substantiated by its underlying rating system that, from a scholarly perspective, bears an uncomfortably close resemblance with the star-rating systems of commercial networking sites. SentiStrength's lexicon-based assessment of an emotion term's strength relies on a numerical scale from 5 (extremely positive) to -5 (extremely negative) (see Driscoll 2015, 864).

analysis can be made to serve the exploration of the online reviewers' cultural norms because it (1) allows for the systematic investigation of large datasets, (2) highlights the functional aspects of discourse and views language as "an instrument put to work" (Partington and Marchi 2015, 216) for a specific purpose and (3) can be effectively combined with other academic disciplines (see Partington and Marchi 2015, 224). I work with a freeware corpus analysis toolkit called Antconc,<sup>17</sup> which was developed by the linguist Laurence Anthony. Accordingly, and contrary to SentiStrength, the software originated and is primarily used in academic contexts and therefore does not bear the risk of merely repeating the materialist dimension of emotions. Antconc offers a number of statistical overview techniques such as keyword listing or concordancing and thus proves most useful in disclosing the reading behaviour of the digital affect.

As keyword analysis describes an inherently comparative approach, it is only possible to both uncover and evaluate the specific features of my self-constructed corpus of online reviews by comparing it with another, e.g. large corpus of general English such as the British National Corpus (BNC). The keyword list tool thus helps to determine words that are "statistically significant in terms of frequency" and "highlight register-specific features" (Bednarek 2008, 28). Figure 2 shows the top 20 key nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs of the 5,220 online reviews including the hits (absolute frequency) and keyness (relative frequency, i.e. frequency in relation to the BNC).

That the keyness of the words presented in the keyword list is predominantly high can be confirmed by a comparison between the Amazon and Goodreads sub-corpora. In contrast to the keyness numbers in Figure 2, the keyness of words used in the two sub-corpora never exceeds the three-digit range. This finding reinforces the assumptions that language use across the different social media sites is similar and, moreover, signifies newly "emerging forms of [digital] discourse" (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 2019, 248). The comparison between the entire reviews corpus and the BNC reference corpus indicates that nouns tend to reach the highest keyness. Both the total number of hits and the keyness rates of nouns like *book* or *novel* are unobtrusive as they refer to central constituents of the practice of reviewing. That reviewing is an evaluative practice is further emphasized by the second key noun *stars* and the top key verb *rated*. The keyness of *Nigeria* and related adjectives such as *Nigerian*, *Igbo* or *Yoruba* appears equally inconspicuous since the reviewed novels are written by authors from and/or set in the country and the regions of its different ethnic groups. However, the amount of keywords used to describe this circumstance hints at the reviewers' wish to "expand [their] horizon" (Dancing Lawn, YouTube) as a means of social distinction (see key verb *know*). The exceptional frequency of proper names further highlights that the online readers pursue this endeavour via the establishment of personal connections with the authors (e.g. *Adichie*) and/or the characters (e.g. *Yejide*, *Ada*, *Ijeoma*)

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17 I am indebted to Michael Westphal, who pointed my attention to keyword analysis and Antconc, and to Rainer Schulze, whose helpful comments on my first set of data collected in 2018 form the basis of several of the following findings.

Nouns			Verbs		
Hits	Keyness	Keyword	Hits	Keyness	Keyword
9141	44992.85	book	5137	23646.07	read
5691	38831.68	stars	1940	13777.25	rated
5137	23646.07	read	1699	7951.01	comment
4565	21724.03	story	1970	7277.20	reading
2282	17362.10	Nigeria	1494	6740.36	liked
2777	16187.19	novel	1985	5031.04	love
2401	13719.08	characters	4249	3890.82	like
1066	9662.76	Adichie	1186	3211.20	writing
904	8194.16	Yejide	614	2932.23	recommend
1699	7951.01	comment	794	2909.33	loved
878	7767.17	Biafra	2657	2307.36	know
2166	7738.51	books	619	1920.89	enjoyed
1488	6942.46	author	725	1538.44	lives
836	6511.07	Ada	1908	1361.91	think
627	5683.16	Ijeoma	1028	1325.07	feel
918	5598.67	shelves	146	1099.06	storytelling
2364	5273.23	war	883	837.11	felt
736	5201.80	Akin	208	816.88	reads
1985	5031.04	love	182	718.07	struggles
537	4867.35	Olanna	239	528.45	feels

  

Adjectives			Adverbs		
Hits	Keyness	Keyword	Hits	Keyness	Keyword
1425	11418.58	Nigerian	3852	10678.78	really
1104	6379.67	amazing	517	2630.05	beautifully
553	4874.09	Biafran	430	1533.55	definitely
483	4357.81	Igbo	292	536.91	absolutely
291	2489.53	favorite	219	534.52	basically
704	2379.86	African	138	505.58	incredibly
829	2237.45	beautiful	608	483.51	actually
845	2152.74	interesting	362	413.16	highly
575	1780.27	good	220	395.46	deeply
200	1527.35	heartbreaking	108	371.36	emotionally
257	1299.66	compelling	145	222.28	ultimately
414	1062.99	wonderful	88	201.63	honestly
542	1018.12	civil	65	197.73	brilliantly
355	1013.76	sad	400	194.73	especially
129	1003.00	Yoruba	60	175.34	wonderfully
338	973.44	brilliant	21	161.86	skilfully
249	841.82	fascinating	88	147.40	hopefully
211	810.91	fantastic	97	140.07	thoroughly
1215	766.21	great	20	137.30	masterfully
101	716.19	captivating	15	123.68	heartbreakingly

Figure 2: Keyword List

At first glance, the endeavour to construct intimacy runs counter to the practices of rating and evaluating the novels, which are emphasized by the keyness of adjectives such as *good*, *wonderful*, *brilliant* and *great*. In their recent analysis of 692 Goodreads reviews for seven Australian and Canadian bestsellers, Beth Driscoll and DeNel Rehberg Sedo note that the preponderance of evaluative language results from the fact that "evaluation is implicitly encouraged by the site" (2019, 251). Their second finding, i.e. that literary fiction in particular prompts "aesthetic judgment" (2019, 251), equally applies to the online reviews for the new Nigerian novel. As the keyness of the personal pronouns *I* (hits: 26,263; rate: 29376.44) and *me* (hits: 4258; rate: 4552.15) suggests, evaluation fosters the individuality discourse that reveals the reviewers' attempts at establishing the distinctiveness of their assessment which, in turn, underscores their status as influencers or authorities. The unusual frequency of the verb *recommend*, on the other hand, expresses the opposing desire to guide other readers on their way to literary sophistication. Given the keyness of emotion verbs such as *enjoyed* or *like*, *love* and *feel* in their different inflections, or the number of key adjectives and adverbs expressing an emotion, it seems misleading to distinguish between evaluative and emotional language use, as Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo do (see 2019, 251-252). Rather, the experience of an emotion functions as a central criterion of evaluation that determines both the distinction from and attachment to the reading community.

A major problem underlying quantitative linguistic analyses concerns the unquestioned identification and categorization of so-called 'emotion terms.' Monika Bednarek, for instance, whose corpus-linguistic study compares emotional language use across four different text types, bases her investigation on the assumption that corpora of general English like the BNC include "common emotion terms" (2008, 48; my emphasis) that describe "*basic* (possibly *universal*) emotions" (2008, 49; my emphases). Although these terms "are recognized [as such] by a large number of emotion researchers" (Bednarek 2008, 49), the approach shows essentializing tendencies and disregards the socio-economic functions of emotion talk. Accordingly, my postcolonial perspective on the performance of emotions in digital settings entails a bottom-up approach to the emotional language of the digital affect to highlight what the case study can contribute to emotion research.

Presenting a word list of emotion terms with more than 100 hits, Figure 3 confirms what the above keyword list already indicates. Bursting with emotion terms, the online reviewers significantly complement Bednarek's list of pre-defined words (see 2008, 49).<sup>18</sup> Expressing a bodily connection, the preferred use of emotion verbs and adjectives emphasize the physicality of a middlebrow reading experience (see Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 2019, 253-254). Key adjectives like *heartbreaking* (see Figure 2) and frequent constructions with the verbs *moved* (121), *cry* (57) and *laugh* (32) or the adjectives *moving* (289) and *touching* (94) further specify Nicola Humble's notorious claim that highbrow and middlebrow reading practices can be distinguished by the consumer's "Sitting Forward or Sitting Back" (2011), as the title of her article has it.

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18 Emotion terms that appear less than a hundred times include the nouns *surprise* (71), *shock* (25), *admiration* (9), the adjectives *angry* (54), *keen* (26) and *worried* (24) and the adverbs *sadly* (48), *desperately* (38) and *happily* (23).

nouns	love (1985), hope (477), feeling (263), feelings (187), loss (182), pain (175), emotions (172), fear (164), care (149), suffering (126), hate (105)
verbs	love (1985), feel (1028), felt (883), loved (794), enjoyed (619), hope (477), enjoy (263), feeling (263), feels (239), excited (184), fear (164), care (149), suffering (126), moved (121), disappointed (111), expect (110), hate (105)
adjectives	amazing (1104), interesting (845), sad (355), moving (289), happy (285), emotional (266), fascinating (249), lost (193) tragic (184), gripping (145), lovely (138), moved (121), disappointed (111), terrible (107), painful (102), captivating (101)
adverbs	emotionally (108)

Figure 3: Frequent Emotion Terms

Moreover, an exemplary look at the second most common emotion verb *feel* suggests that linguistic keyword analysis can add to emotion research in middlebrow consumption contexts. Applying the software's concordance tool, which enables the examination of "recurring patternings of words surrounding the search item" (Partington and Marchi 2015, 217), one finds both expected and unexpected expression patterns. Figure 4 presents the four most frequent realizations of the key emotion verb *feel*. In their expression of emotions, the online reviewers show a clear preference for subject-verb-object constructions such *I feel changed* or *I felt affection* but also use more complex realizations that feature subordinate clauses to compare the emotion to an imagined event such as *I feel as though I have just returned from Nigeria* or *I felt like the characters were my friends*. The third group of verb realizations highlights that the expression of emotions necessitates a kind of stimulus, i.e. "the cause, reason or target of an emotion" (Bednarek 2008, 70) and thus bespeaks the online reviewers' opposing wish to connect with the novels' authors and characters as well as other readers (see above). Constructions like *I feel her agony* or *I felt her pain* substantiate that reading is constructed as an act of identification as it turns the novels' characters into projection surfaces of readerly desires and needs.

I feel (+ noun)	affection, connection, emotion, empathy, familiarity [her] agony, conflict, pain, plight, pressure
I feel (+ adjective)	changed, connected, emotional, empowered, good, grounded, human, involved, rewarded, saved
I feel (+ subordinate clause)	I am right there, I have just returned from Nigeria, I know these characters, the characters were my friends, the characters and their problems were real

Figure 4: Constructions with Key Emotion Verb

While the concordance tool verifies the reviewers' acts of appropriating racial and cultural differences, it also suggests that dominant constructions with *feel* + evaluation terms and *feel* + emotion terms are accompanied by emerging clusters that are specific to the online responses in my corpus. Expressions like *the novel feels autobiographical* or *unresolved*, *the characters felt fleshed out*, *realistic* or *universal* and *I felt the authenticity* or *I felt cultured* testify to the reviewers' creative linguistic capacity to turn every reading impression or experience into an emotion. Summarizing her reviewing

agenda in her profile, Goodreads reviewer Barbara remarks that "my reviews are my feelings." The profitability of this agenda suggests that online reviews are indeed worthy of investigation "on their own terms as complex cultural practices" (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 2019, 248).

Although the linguistic review analysis yields remarkably homogenous results, it would be hasty to conclude that the findings contradict Chibber's key arguments. Depending on the neocolonial power politics of internet and media corporations like Amazon and YouTube, which determine the rules of talking about postcolonial writing, the online reviewers' emotional language use represents a female bourgeois strategy of affective capital accumulation. The dominance of middle-class culture in the US and the UK has always entailed its agents' unacknowledged claim to speak for the whole of mankind. Unsurprisingly, then, the online community's emotion ideologies signal, in the words of Timothy Aubry, "a democratic fantasy of its own universal appeal" (2011, 4) which functions as an effective strategy of marketing the new Nigerian novel. Chibber is indeed right to assert that capitalism's global spread need not erase all differences but merely has to subordinate those differences that interfere with "the production and distribution of use-values" (2013, 150-151). The 21<sup>st</sup>-century capitalism of Amazon, Goodreads and YouTube monetizes emotions by offering the new Nigerian novel as a means to increase belonging to dominant economic structures. As the case study suggests, their emodities find a growing number of consumers who readily participate in the digital emotion trade.

Regardless of its different incarnations, capitalism has always had a huge empire at its disposal and therefore references a global phenomenon that has entailed the combined and uneven development of the world from its inception. The online reviews disclose that the consolidation of ever new sections of the middle classes at the cost of the colonial Other continues into the new millennium. It merely differs from earlier centuries in that it renders capital accumulation a digital venture and grants increasing agency to the postcolonial Other that now takes part in shaping its conditions.

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